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Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee
March 25, 2019 | 10:00 AM

Chairmen Regan and Williams, and other members of the Senate Veteran Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before this committee to discuss how Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education is assisting our veterans and military-affiliated students.

For the last five years, I have had the honor of being the Director of the Military and Veterans Resource Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I have worked and assisted over one thousand students who are veterans, members of the armed forces currently serving this great county, members of the PA National Guard, reserves, and the spouses and children of veterans. Overall there are currently over 2500 military-affiliated students in the 14 state system universities. I currently serve as the Co-Chair of the State System's Veterans Advisory Network which consists of administrators from the 14 state system universities whose goal is to work together, share ideas, and collectively discuss ways to improve the services we provide to veterans. Five years ago, the Veterans Advisory Network, under guidance from the Chancellor's Office, created a DASHBOARD of 14 goals with the purpose of providing our veterans with the best support. All 14 universities are committed to these goals and, every year the 14 universities evaluate their performance towards achieving those 14 goals.

I understand the committee is interested in hearing about, for example, how the State System is recognizing veterans' training and experiences; what we, as a system, do to ensure that they are not duplicating classes; how we assist their spouses; and, how universities fast track them through any credential-related program or course.

First off, let me address how we recognize veterans' training and offer them credit for their military training and prior learning experiences.

Each of the 14 universities has administrators who evaluate the service member's Joint Service Transcript (JST). The JST provides a list of the service member's training, military classes, and other experiences. A prospective student will submit the JST as part of their admissions application. The JST is evaluated by a university official who assigns university credit based on the applicant's type of military training in relation to their major, as well as with suggestions from the American Council on Education (ACE). ACE works with the Defense Department to evaluate military training and provides suggestions on the amount of college credit that training is worth and which college courses can be substituted for that training. Not only do the 14 universities provide this benefit for undergraduate students, but many are now providing this benefit to graduate students.

To keep students from repeating and duplicating classes, the universities have policies and procedures in place to prevent such an error.

The System's 14 universities are required under federal regulations (in relation to the use of GI Bill benefits) to make sure the VA has not paid for the same class twice. School Certifying Officials (SCOs) across our universities are responsible for submitting enrollment and payment information to the Department of Veterans Affairs for students who use GI Bill benefits.

Under federal regulations, SCOs are not allowed to certify a student for the same class twice. The only exception to this rule is if the student failed a class once. The VA will allow the student to retake a failed course one additional time, and the VA will still pay for that class. The VA conducts compliance surveys at college and universities to ensure schools are following federal regulations. As part of this compliance survey, they will review students' transcripts, class schedules, and other registration information to ensure we have not certified students for duplicated classes. If the students were certified for duplicative classes, the student or school could be required to pay that money back to the VA. Internally, each university has its procedures and policies to prevent students from taking duplicated classes. At IUP, if a student registers for a class that is a duplicate or for class for which they did not meet the requirements, the class is red-flagged in the system. When the student's advisor reviews their registration, they will delete any classes that have been red flagged.

Not only are the 14 System universities passionate about helping veterans succeed, they are passionate about helping their families as well.

Spouses may currently use one of three different GI Bill chapters. Spouses can use Chapter 33, or the Post 9/11 GI Bill, that has been transferred to them from their spouse. Spouses may also receive benefits under Chapter 35. If a veteran has a 100% service connected disability or died because of the disability or service, the veteran's spouse is eligible for Chapter 35 benefits. Lastly, spouses of service members who were killed in Iraq or Afghanistan are eligible for the Fry Scholarship under Chapter 33. SCOs assist spouses by helping them complete the necessary application for each of the GI Bill chapters, sending their enrollment information to the VA, and working with them to resolve any issues they have with their GI Bill payments. The SCOs at all 14 universities also provide spouses with a list of outside scholarships from non-profit organizations. SCOs also provide spouses with the same supportive services that we provide to veterans. If the SCOs do not have the resources to help a spouse, we will refer the spouse to community partners who aid veterans and their families. Spouses are always welcomed at Veterans Day events and are welcome to use the resources at veteran centers across the System.

Finally, System universities work to make sure veterans move efficiently in their pursuit of a credential-related programs and courses.

Veterans and other qualified military-affiliated students, who may or may not be using GI Bill benefits, are entitled to priority registration. The students who qualify for this benefit can register for classes sooner than the rest of the student body. Most GI Bill recipients receive 36 months of benefits. This policy ensures that veterans and military-affiliated students can get into classes that they need to graduate and helps them maximize the 36 months of benefits.

In closing, thank you for this opportunity to offer remarks on behalf of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education and its 14 universities. With support from the Office of the Chancellor, our universities have done incredible work to support veterans, their families, and those currently serving our country. Together with our Veterans Advisory Network, we operate together to hold each other accountable and to figure out ways to better assist these exceptional students.

I am happy to speak with any member of the committee or to answer any questions about the any of the work of the Veterans Advisory Network.

Thank you